

6-3-2009

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Parent-Child Relationships

Abstract

One of the most important and earliest relationships is the parent-child relationship. During infancy, this relationship focuses on the parent responding to the infant's basic needs. Over time, an attachment forms between the parent and child in response to the these day-to-day interactions. During toddlerhood, parents attempt to shape their children's social behaviors. Parents play various roles for their toddlers, including acting as teacher, nurturers, and providers of guidance and affection. Throughout childhood, children become more interested in peers. However, parents continue to influence their children through their parenting styles. In addition, parents serve as providers of social opportunities, confidants, coaches, and advisors. Although this relationship evolves throughout development, the parent-child relationship still exerts considerable influence over the child.

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Food Science | Human and Clinical Nutrition

Comments

This book chapter is from *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships*, 3(2009);1199-1203. DOI:[10.4135/9781412958479](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479). Posted with permission.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

One of the most important and earliest relationships is the parent-child relationship. During infancy, this relationship focuses on the parent responding to the infant's basic needs. Over time, an attachment forms between the parent and child in response to these day-to-day interactions. During toddlerhood, parents attempt to shape their children's social behaviors. Parents play various roles for their toddlers, including acting as teachers, nurturers, and providers of guidance and affection. Throughout childhood, children become more interested in peers. However, parents continue to influence their children through their parenting styles. In addition, parents serve as providers of social opportunities, confidants, coaches, and advisors. Although this relationship evolves throughout development, the parent-child relationship still exerts considerable influence over the child.

Theoretical Approaches to Parent-Child Relationships

Several theoretical approaches address the parent-child relationship, including the typological approach, the attachment-theoretical approach, and the social-interaction approach.

The Typological Approach

One of the most influential theories was proposed by Diana Baumrind, who distinguished among three types of parental childrearing approaches. Authoritative parenting is characterized as warm, responsive, and involved, yet unintrusive. Authoritative parents set reasonable limits and expect appropriately mature behavior from their children. Authoritarian parenting is harsh, unresponsive, and rigid. These parents tend to use power-assertive methods of control with their children. Permissive parenting is lax. Permissive parents exercise inconsistent discipline and allow their children to express their impulses freely. Research has found that authoritative but not authoritarian or overly permissive parenting fosters positive emotional, social, and cognitive development in children. Longitudinal studies indicate that authoritative

parenting is associated with positive outcomes for both younger children and adolescents, and that responsive, firm parent-child relationships were especially important in the development of competence in sons. Moreover, authoritarian childrearing had more negative long-term outcomes for boys than for girls. Sons of authoritarian parents were low in both cognitive and social competence. Their academic and intellectual performance was poor. In addition, they were unfriendly and lacking in initiative, leadership, and self-confidence in their relations with peers. Children of permissive or laissez-faire parents were often impulsive, aggressive, and bossy, and they were low in independence and achievement.

Later, a fourth parenting style was recognized—namely, uninvolved parenting, which is parenting that is indifferent and neglectful. Uninvolved parents focus on their own needs rather than the needs of their child. Uninvolved parenting has been associated with disruptions in attachment for infants and impulsivity, aggression, noncompliance, moodiness, and low self-esteem in older children.

More recently, Brian Barber further distinguished types of control that are not fully captured by Baumrind's four-cell typology. He distinguished behavioral control (regulation of the child's behavior through firm but appropriate discipline and monitoring) from psychological control (regulation of the child's activities by modifying his or her emotional state by using guilt or shame induction, love withdrawal, and parental intrusiveness). High levels of psychological control or high use of both behavioral and psychological control is associated with internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, and self-derogation.

One concern with the typological approach is whether the identified types and their consequences are universal. Recent studies have questioned the generalizability of these styles across SES and ethnic/cultural groups. For example, research has found lower SES parents are more likely to use an authoritarian style, but this style is often an adaptation to the ecological conditions such as increased danger and threat that may characterize the environments of poor families. Moreover, the use of authoritarian strategies under these circumstances has been linked with more positive outcomes for children. A second challenge to the presumed universal advantage of authoritative childrearing styles comes from

cross-ethnic studies. Accumulating evidence underscores the nonuniversality of these stylistic distinctions and suggests the importance of developing concepts that are based on an indigenous appreciation of the culture in question.

Attachment Approach to Parent-Child Relationships

John Bowlby's attachment theory is derived from the evolutionary assumption that both infants and parents are prepared to respond to each other's behaviors in a way that ensures that parents provide their infants with the care and protection that contributes to their survival. Many children form secure attachments, where caregivers serve as sources of nurturance and affection, which gives these children the confidence to explore the world and become more independent. However, when caregivers are less dependable and nurturing, some children form insecure attachments to their caregivers. These children may exhibit resistant, avoidant, or disorganized behaviors toward their caregivers.

Securely and insecurely attached youngsters develop different social and emotional patterns. Research has found that at 4 to 5 years of age, securely attached children were more socially competent, were more socially skilled, and had more friends than other children. Moreover, their classmates considered them more popular than others. At 8 and 12 years of age, securely attached children continued to be more socially competent, peer oriented, and less dependent on adults. Additionally, they were more likely to develop close friendships than their less securely attached peers. At age 19, those adolescents with a history of secure attachment had higher socioemotional functioning, were more likely to have close family relationships, long-term friendships, sustained romantic involvement, higher self-confidence, and greater determination regarding personal goals than peers who had a history of insecure attachment. Attachment has been linked with self-esteem, risk behaviors, and family communication in high schoolers.

The Parent-Child Interactional Approach

Research in this tradition is based on the assumption that face-to-face interaction with parents may provide the opportunity to learn, rehearse,

and refine social skills that are common to successful social interactions with other social partners. This approach overlaps with the attachment approach: Both focus on the importance of examining parent-child interaction patterns in order to understand later development, but they differ in their emphasis on the theoretical centrality of the attachment construct. The parent-child interactional approach focuses more on specific aspects of parent-child exchanges (e.g., positive and negative reciprocity) and assumes that these variables are continuous in contrast to the categorical approach (i.e., attachment classifications) endorsed by attachment theorists. Research in this tradition has yielded several conclusions. First, the nature of the interaction between parent and child is linked to a variety of social outcomes, including aggression and achievement. Parents who are responsive, warm, and engaging are more likely to have children who are more socially competent. In contrast, parents who are hostile and controlling have children who experience more difficulty with peers.

Although there are many similarities in the interactive styles of mothers and fathers, evidence is emerging that mothers and fathers make unique and independent contributions to their children's social development. Quality, rather than quantity, of parent-child interaction is an important predictor of cognitive and social development. Fathers tend to engage in more emotionally arousing interactions that induce excitement, which has been linked to the development of children's emotional regulation. Mothers, in contrast, are more emotionally modulated in their exchanges with infants and children, but are more didactic and use more toys and materials in their interactions. Both maternal and paternal styles, especially when used in a manner that is sensitive to the child's behavior and emotions, are related to children's success with peers.

Not only are differences in interactive style associated with children's social competence, but the nature of the emotional displays during parent-child interaction is important as well. The affective (emotional) quality of popular children's interactions with their parents differs from that of rejected children and their parents. Consistently higher levels of positive affect have been found in both parents and children in popular dyads than in rejected dyads. Whereas negative parental affect is associated with lower levels of peer

acceptance, children of fathers who tend to respond to their children's negative affect displays with negative affect of their own are less socially skilled (less altruistic, more avoidant, and more aggressive) than their preschool classmates. The influence of the reciprocity of negative affect has been demonstrated only for fathers, which suggests that fathers may play a particularly salient role in children learning how to manage negative emotions in the context of social interactions. Thus, both the nature of parent-child interaction and the affective quality of the relationship are important correlates of children's social development.

Alternative Pathways: Parents as Advisors and Providers of Opportunities

Learning about relationships through interaction with parents can be viewed as an indirect pathway of influence because the goal is often not explicitly to influence children's social relationships with extrafamilial partners. In contrast, parents may influence children's relationships directly in their role as instructor, educator, or advisor. In this role, parents may explicitly aim to educate their children concerning appropriate ways of initiating and maintaining social relationships, as well as learning social and moral rules. Additionally, parents can serve as gatekeepers and regulators of opportunities to have contact with social resources such as peers and social institutions.

Evidence has suggested that the quality of parental advice is related positively to children's social competence with peers among preschool and elementary school children. In adolescence, parents shift their advice-giving strategies and try to keep their children from being influenced by some peers who may be advocating risky or deviant behaviors. This "parental guidance" approach has been associated with selecting friends with low levels of antisocial behavior and higher levels of academic achievement.

Parents can also impact children's social relationships by monitoring their social activities. Poor monitoring is linked to lower academic skills, peer acceptance, and higher rates of delinquency and externalizing behavior. Monitoring has recently been reconceptualized as a process that is jointly

codetermined by the parent and child (both parent and child mutually participate in defining how much information is disclosed by the child and the level of control the parent will exert). Monitoring may be a function of the extent to which children share information about their activities and companion choices with their parents. Prior research on monitoring may be reinterpreted to suggest that children with poorer social adjustment discuss their activities with parents less than well-adjusted children do.

Parents arrange children's contact with peers by designing children's daily informal and formal activities, which promote or discourage children's peer relationships especially when children are young. Investigators have examined children's informal play contacts by describing who arranges the contacts, characteristics of the children's playmates, and the relations between these indicators and children's development. Parents who initiated at least one informal play contact over the past month had children with a larger range of playmates and more companions. Although the role of parents decreases across middle childhood and adolescence, parents and children continue to share responsibility for the initiation and regulation of peer contacts.

Parent-Child Relationship and Other Family Relationships

Although researchers have commonly focused on the parent-child relationship as an independent unit, this dyad is embedded in a variety of other family relationships, including the coparenting relationship. Coparenting refers to the degree to which individual parent-child relationships and styles of interaction are coordinated between parents in their efforts to socialize their children. These patterns can vary in terms of positive/negative affect and degree of coordination and consistency.

Coparenting

Researchers have become increasingly interested in coparenting in recognition that mothers and fathers operate not only as individual parents, but also as a parenting team. A variety of coparenting alliances

can be formed, including antagonistic and adult-centered or hostile-competitive alliances, where there is a significant imbalance or discrepancy in the level of parental engagement with the child. There are also coparenting alliances reflecting cooperation, warmth, cohesion, family harmony, and child-focused. These patterns have been observed across a range of studies with infants, preschoolers, and school-age children and in both European-American and African-American families.

The family unit may include not just a triadic (mother-father-child) unit, but also a larger set of players as other children join the family. Research on coparenting suggests that the coparenting system may undergo radical modification when more than one child is involved. In two-child families, research has found that each parent tends to engage with one child at a time, and that the four members of the family varied in the quality of interactions and amount of unity depending on outside influences such as siblings' gender, age differences, and temperament. In addition, the nuclear family unit is embedded in the extended family, which has unique influences, as does the society and culture in which the family exists.

Determinants of Parent-Child Relationships

In this section, a variety of determinants of the nature of parent-child relationships will be considered. A three-domain model of the determinants of parenting developed by Jay Belsky includes personal resources of the parents, characteristics of the child, and contextual sources of stress and support.

Child Characteristics

The evolutionary approach to child characteristics focuses on tendencies found universally across children. Over the last several decades, evidence has documented that infants are biologically prepared for social, cognitive, and perceptual challenges, and that these prepared responses significantly facilitate children's adaptation to their environment. For example, the ability to recognize human facial features from early in life facilitates recognition of caregivers and fosters attachment. In addition, individual differences between children across a variety

of behavioral characteristics also shape parent-child interactions. A well-researched determinant of parenting behavior is infant and child temperament. Compared with less difficult infants, infants with difficult temperaments elicit more arousal, distress, and coercive parenting behavior from caregivers. In contrast, fearful children may respond optimally to subtle parental socialization strategies such as reasoning or redirection rather than harsh, punitive, or coercive tactics. In general, more active, less responsive, and compliant children elicit more negative parenting and parental affect.

Personal Resources of Parents

Parental resources such as knowledge, ability, and motivation to be a responsible caregiver alter the parent-child relationship. Recent studies show that parental psychopathology, including depression, alters parenting practices. From early infancy onward, interactions between depressed and nondepressed parents and their offspring tend to be less positive, synchronous, and stimulating. (Synchrony refers to a caregiver's ability to adjust his or her behavior to the infant's signals to maintain a social interaction.) This is especially true with long-term parental depression. Infants of depressed mothers may also develop insecure attachments to their caregivers. Other parental problems such as antisocial personality disorder, schizophrenia, limited education, and poverty all contribute to poorer parenting. Positive personal characteristics such as high intelligence, self-control, and selflessness predict better parenting. Recent theorists have argued that some of these individual differences across parents may, in part, be genetically based. Current studies seek to address the interplay of genetically based individual differences among infants and parents and environmental factors that enhance or suppress the influence of these characteristics.

Families, Social Networks, and Social Capital

The concept of social networks includes people, institutions, and community organizations outside the immediate family structure. Social capital is both the flow of information and the sharing of norms and values that serve to facilitate or constrain the actions of people who interact within the

community's social structures (e.g., schools, places of worship, business enterprises). Children benefit when there is a relatively high degree of agreement about social norms and values among members of their family and the wider community. Social network members may facilitate monitoring of children and help socialize children. For example, one study found that adolescent boys had better school attendance and performance, as well as more positive social behavior, when their social networks included large numbers of nonrelated adults.

Ethnicity and Development of Parent-Child Relationships

There has been a marked increase in attention to how ethnicity shapes parent-child relationships. Recent studies of discipline in different ethnic groups suggest that African-American parents are more likely than European-American parents to use physical punishment, even after controlling for SES. However, although the use of physical discipline often predicts higher levels of externalizing (i.e., acting out, aggression, hitting, etc.) for European Americans, this is not true for African Americans. (Abusive levels of physical discipline, however, are detrimental to children irrespective of ethnic or racial background.) Several explanations for these findings have been offered, including the more normative nature of physical punishment in African-American subculture and the need to enforce rules more strictly in the dangerous environments in which African Americans are more likely to reside. Growing up in dangerous neighborhoods brings greater risks for involvement in antisocial behavior. Under these circumstances, strict obedience to parental authority appears to be an adaptive strategy, which parents may endeavor to maintain through physical discipline.

Future Directions

Families are dynamic and are continuously confronted by challenges, changes, and opportunities. A number of society-wide changes have produced shifts in parent-child relationships. Fertility rates and family size have decreased, the percentage of women in the workforce has increased, the timing of onset of parenthood has shifted, divorce rates

have risen, and the number of single-parent families has increased. These social trends provide an opportunity to explore how parent-child relationships adapt and change in response to these shifting circumstances and represent "natural experiments" in coping and adaptation. Moreover, these historical shifts challenge our traditional assumptions that this relationship can be fully understood from studies conducted at a single point in time. The research task is to establish how parent-child processes operate similarly or differently under varying historical circumstances. Illustrative examples of recent trends in parenting research include emerging work on parent-child relationships in gay and lesbian families, the impact of the new reproductive technologies on parent-child relationships, and the effects of parental incarceration on parent-child ties.

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and Ross D. Parke*

See also Attachment Typologies; Childhood; Extended Families; Family Relationships in Adolescence; Family Relationships in Childhood; Father-Child Relationships; Mother-Child Relationships in Adolescence and Adulthood

Further Readings

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